Adjustments to the Task Force Scout Platoon

by Staff Sergeant Matthew Mayo

The task force scout platoon is a unique element within its parent unit. It is one of only two combat arms platoons in a headquarters company of 300 men. The platoon's chain of command can be confusing because it reports directly to the task force commander. Its mission task and purpose can be conflicted by differences between the S2 and S3 on what the scout platoon should be doing, which is compounded by the fact that scouts are usually already in zone or sector when these differences arise. These problems occur during maneuver training and wartime and are exacerbated by new demands placed on the platoon that are not addressed by doctrine.

Due to the number of personnel, vehicles, and overall quality of the 19D cavalry scout, the platoon is frequently called on to accomplish many nonstandard missions as well. Missions, such as combat patrols, one-section traffic control points, and inner urban reconnaissance, continue to put scouts in new and unfamiliar positions. On today's high-paced battlefield and tomorrow's battlefield of no boundaries, the breadth of possible missions continues to grow. The scout platoon needs to be the best equipped platoon in the battalion to handle all possible missions.

Vehicles

Task force scouts are currently equipped with either the M1114 up-armored high mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicle (HMMWV) or the older, more vulnerable M1025/26 HMMWV. Once the 3d Infantry Division completed its transition from M3 cavalry fighting vehicle (CFV)-equipped battalion scout platoons to HMMWVs, the Army completed its swap from the most capable scout vehicle currently in inventory to a cheaper, more maintenance friendly, less capable platform. Some people, especially scouts never assigned to a CFV platoon, argue a HMMWV is more suited to scouting. The argument is a CFV is too big, too loud, and not maneuverable. A HMMWV, especially the turbocharged M1114, is also loud when trying to power through loose desert sand, Korean paddies, or European woods.

Wheeled vehicles will never negotiate terrain, ditches, or water obstacles that tracks can, and only the narrowest alleys make the difference between HMMWV and Bradley movement. What a Bradley CFV lacks in stealth it makes up in observation, firepower, and survivability. The M3A2 has three very effective, stabilized weapons systems slaved to a thermal sight that is better than the sight on an M1A1. The M3A2ODS incorporates a laser range finder, on-board global positioning system, and an electronic compass with the integrated sight unit (ISU) to provide distance, direction, and 10-digit grids to targets for the most accurate spot reports and calls for fire. The M3A3 is capable of tracking two targets with its second-generation forward-looking infrared (FLIR) sight.

Task force scouts are beginning to field the long-range advanced scout surveillance system (LRAS3), but only three to a platoon, limiting task organization. The LRAS3 is a very effective optic, but its dismount capabilities exist only in the minds of the people who wrote the technical manual. Its bulk and weight make it very impractical for any extra-vehicular mission. This forces scouts to use the HMMWV to support the weight and energy requirements for the LRAS3, posing the problem of survivability. To make maximum use of its optics, the CFV- or LRAS3-equipped HMMWV must place itself in position to observe the enemy, which is never as safe as a pure-hide site. Once the vehicle has sacrificed some of its cover and/or concealment for observa-

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tion, it has to be prepared to take a beating.

The M1025/26 can stop only the weakest of shrapnel and gets chewed up by 7.62mm (AK-47) fire. The M1114 is very effective at stopping 7.62mm, shrapnel, and even antipersonnel mines, but rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), plentiful on all battlefields, slice straight through it. The M3 has at least 30mm direct-fire protection, stops shrapnel and antipersonnel mines, and prevents all but the luckiest RPG shots from penetrating the hull. It is also equipped with a fire-suppression system and a nuclear, biological, and chemical defense system; HMMWVs have neither. The 25mm Bushmaster cannon presents the enemy with a serious problem. The CFV can destroy any vehicle, up to a T-72, with its cannon and, as a last resort, can destroy the modern tank with its tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided (TOW) missiles. The HMMWV's unstabilized M2 .50-caliber machine gun or 40mm MK19 grenade launcher are capable, at best, of laying an effective suppressive fire while withdrawing. These examples are mainly defensive, but are only multiplied when weighing the platform's offensive capabilities.

Weapons

The current weapons selection and assignment could be adjusted. Task force platoons currently have five M2 .50-caliber machine gun trucks and five MK19 grenade launcher trucks. The .50 caliber is a tried-and-true weapon, but is very old. It is not uncommon to have guns produced for America's previous wars in service today. You can only transplant so many new parts into an old receiver before it stops working. Scouts must be one of the first to field the Army's .50-caliber replacement.

The MK19 grenade launcher is a reliable weapon, but terrain dictates its effectiveness. The 40mm projectile requires 16 to 30 meters of flight to arm. This is not a problem in open terrain but becomes a serious one in the close confines of wooded terrain or urban streets. The scout platoon already has an answer for this, the M240B machine gun. The M240B can replace the MK19 as mission dictates. The solution would be even easier if scout trucks were equipped with the two-weapon turrets that infantry TOW companies have. These turrets would allow the MK19 and the M240B to be mounted 90 degrees from each other and require only a small spin of the turret to bring the proper weapon on the enemy, based on target and terrain.

The M249 squad automatic weapon (SAW), with collapsible stock and forehand pistol grip, should replace the other five M240Bs in the platoon. The M240B is an excellent firing weapon, but it is heavy, cumbersome, eats lots of ammunition, and requires a three-man crew to properly operate. Dismounted scouts carry a large variety and amount of equipment in what is normally a three-man patrol. There is not enough room left to carry the gun, tripod, and all the ammunition necessary to feed it, and three scouts cannot accomplish their mission and simultaneously be members of a three-man machine gun team. The SAW is a one-man weapon, much lighter, easier to carry, uses smaller and lighter ammunition, yet can still produce fast, well aimed, sustained fire. This weapon should be assigned to a member of the section that always dismounts as part of battle drills, but not the section sergeant because he should already be carrying the manpack.

Each truck should retain its M203 grenade launcher. This is an excellent weapon and great for dismounted operations. Each vehicle should be assigned an M9 pistol. The gunner is the primary means of security for the truck when the crew is mounted. In urban environments, the gunner may not have enough time or room to rotate and/or depress/elevate the weapons system. A quickly drawn pistol may do the job while limiting collateral damage.

Finally, the M4 is a vast improvement over the M16A2. The collapsible stock and rail system make it perfect for any mission and it should not be replaced by the M16A4.

Optics

Scouts are the eyes of the task force commander and must have the best equipment with which to see. In accordance with many current modified tables of organization and equipment (MTOE), platoons are only authorized 20 night vision goggles. This means someone goes without. The truck commander cannot command and control his section or squad if he cannot see past his hood. He should be equipped with the PVS14. This sight does not require that the head mount be constantly flipped up and down to see different things. By keeping one eye adjusted to the dark and one to the goggles, he can scan from map to plugger to terrain without time-consuming eye adjustment. The gunner also needs the PVS14. This will allow him to provide observa-

tion while the vehicle is moving, yet quickly place his other eye in the cup of his weapon sight or thermal. The driver needs the PVS7D. The delta model has a very clear picture and covers both eyes, preventing confusion between the dominant and nondominant eye.

The M240B should have PVS14 and M68 reflex sights. By mounting both of these on the rail system, you have created a sight with better observation and a deadlier aim than the current PVS4. The same can be done to the M249 SAW, if adopted. The TVS5 is a fairly good sight when mounted on the .50-caliber machine gun. It could be made better by mounting a PEQ2A infrared beam to the gun. The beam is far reaching and would make the TVS5/.50-caliber combination much deadlier. What is really needed and available is a thermal sight to mount and zero to the .50 caliber and MK19. A thermal would outperform any passive sight.

The LRAS3 is an excellent sight, but not practical to dismount. The TAS4B is easier to dismount but eats two batteries a night, is loud, and has limited range. The PVS6 mini-eyesafe laser infrared observation set (MELIOS) can only be used during the daylight, it does not "paint" targets and cannot provide an instant grid. The Army must provide scouts with a sight that is at least thermal capable of observing five kilometers, can laze targets, provide distance and direction, be wired to a GPS providing a 10-digit grid, and designate targets for copperhead rounds, all dismountable by one man while a second man carries the batteries.

Simple adjustments to be made — platoons need two pair of binoculars per truck, one for the gunner and one for the tank commander. The Army needs to invest in off-the-shelf binoculars equipped with an internal compass in millimeters, and have the millimeter reticle for indirect fire adjustment. These binoculars are available and affordable.

Communications

Scouts talk to more people on the battlefield than anyone else in the task force. Communications must be maintained with the task force tactical operations center (TOC) and fire support element (FSE), requiring the power amp. Coordination must be made with the brigade reconnaissance team, companies to the rear, and adjacent units. Platoon leaders and section leaders must command and control the elements that require the platoon net on every truck. Take away one radio for dismount operations, which should already be set up in manpack configuration for hasty dismounting, and a section is left juggling nets, which leads to missed calls and incomplete information dissemination.

Scout platoons should already be equipped with 20 all-source imagery processor (ASIP)-model single-channel ground and air radio systems (SINCGARS); by adding 10 more, the scout commo problem can be solved. The section leader's truck should have three radios mounted, with two on power amp at all times, and a fourth radio always set up to dismount. This set up would allow constant long-range communications between platoon leaders and the TOC, a high-powered swing radio for the FSE or unit coordination, and two radios for the squad leader's truck to monitor the platoon net and command. The squad leader can keep the current configuration of two mounted radios for maneuver and use the section leader's truck when controlling the mounted element.

Squad communications must be addressed. By giving each soldier an earpiece and clip microphone, crew coordination needed for vehicle maneuver is provided without sacrificing the sense of hearing, which occurs when wearing a combat vehicle crewman helmet. This will also free up the platoon net by allowing section communications to occur on the headset at short range and improve the crew's situational awareness by monitoring communications between truck commanders. Dismount operations would benefit as well. The certainty of radio communications between dismounts is much better than "yelled" whispers and confused hand gestures in the dark.

Finally, in the realm of commo is the PSN11 GPS. This is a good piece of equipment. When wired to the vehicle's battery and connected to an antenna cable, it cannot be beat. The problem occurs from mounting and dismounting the precision lightweight global positioning system receiver (PLGR) repeatedly during operations. The PSN11 should remain wired to the vehicle while each section uses civilian model GPS trackers for dismounted operations. These are lighter, smaller, and use lighter, smaller batteries. Many scouts have their own for field use, which should tell the Army something about necessary equipment.

Personnel Manning

Thirty men spread across 10 trucks is not enough manpower to safely and securely accomplish the mission. Doctrine recommends three vehicle sections for dismount operations; but the reality is the task force sees four maneuver sections and then assigns four area recons or named areas of interest to observe. If you add eight more scouts, one per maneuver truck, then the section can put a soldier behind the wheel and gun of each truck, the squad leader can control the mounted element, and the section leader and the remaining two scouts can successfully execute patrols, area recons, and long duration operations. The extra soldier also provides local security during short halts.

The scout platoon is a separate maneuver element belonging to the battalion commander. The scout platoon should be authorized a medic and mechanic to the headquarters section just as are line companies. Medical evacuation and maintenance are two areas that can be problematic for the platoon due to the scout's mission and placement on the battlefield. The advantage these two soldiers would provide is obvious.

Perhaps the best way to equip scouts is to use the infantry branch as a guide. Scout training and missions are far more closely related to infantry than armor. Most of the scout's equipment proponent is the infantry branch. Even the Bradley fighting vehicle, the most armor an armored cavalry scout will find himself in, belongs to the infantry branch. The scout's mission of going deep in small teams, with a hand mike as his only lifeline, is similar to long-range surveillance teams. By looking at the MTOE of infantry reconnaissance elements, the focus can again become dismount intensive and provide scouts with the latest and greatest soldier equipment. It's time scouts were given the equipment they need to ensure the task force's current and future success on the battlefield.

SSG (P) Matthew Mayo is the senior scout for 2d Battalion, 70th Armor Regiment, 1st Armored Division, Baghdad, Iraq. He is a Basic Noncommissioned Officers Course Draper Award graduate and a Scout Leaders Course Draper Award graduate. He has served in various command and staff positions, including, cavalry fighting vehicle dismount, driver, and gunner in A Troop, 3d Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, GA; cavalry fighting vehicle gunner, 4th Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, 2d Infantry Division, Camp Garry Owen, Korea; senior scout, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division, Fort Benning; and platoon sergeant, 2d Battalion, 70th Armor Regiment, 1st Armored Division, Fort Riley, KS.